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ABSTRACT

Most children spend more time with media than in school and much more time with media than in meaningful conversation with their parents. Recent research demonstrates how the media act as powerful influences on children's development--on their behaviors, attitudes, language, and values--from the earliest ages. This booklet is intended to help parents use television to promote family interaction and communicate important lessons. It contains several tips on talking with kids about television: (1) start early in talking with kids about the TV, movies, and other media they use; (2) put your family on a family TV diet; (3) talk with your children about setting TV rules for the family; (4) in the family TV diet, create balanced TV meals with your children; (5) find "family exercises" to accompany your family TV diet; (6) help your child "see through TV"; (7) make it a point to watch programs with your children whenever possible; (8) look for special programs that help young people deal with "hot button" topics such as drugs, alcohol, sex, and peer pressure; and (9) be aware of fast-breaking news stories with violent or sexual content. The booklet includes lists of organizations for information and referral, and lists of readings for parents and for children. (EV)

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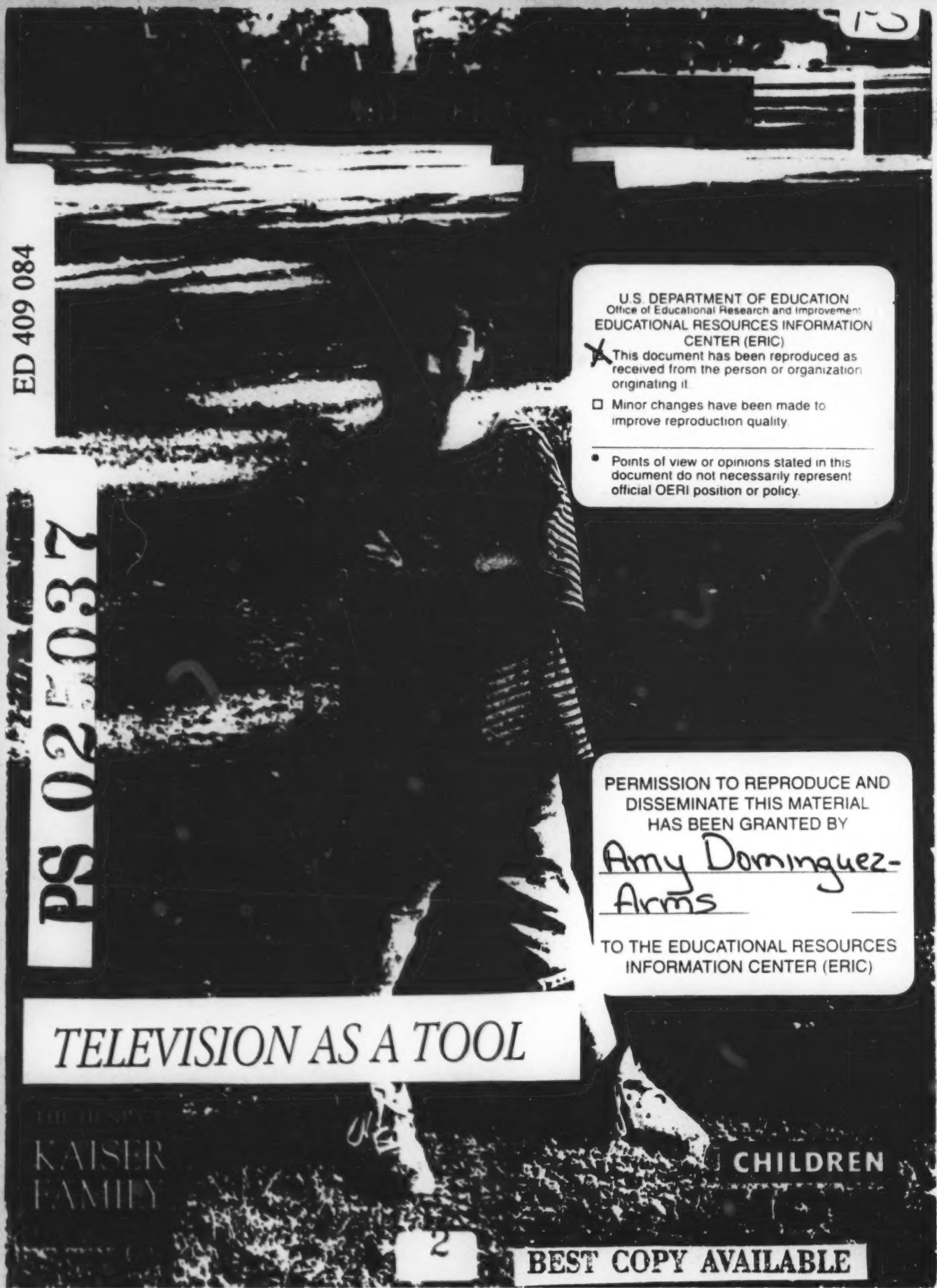

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TELEVISION AS A TOOL

Talking with Kids About TV

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Talking with your kids about TV

We don't usually think of television as an educator for our children. We think of their most formative experiences as coming from our families, schools, churches, community groups, and personal relationships formed with parents, relatives, siblings, friends, classmates, and others.

But our children are growing up in an age of media—TV, movies, video games, and now, computers and the Internet. Reverend Jesse Jackson has called TV "the third parent." One journalist said that TV has become "the loudest voice in many American households." According to a recent book, teenagers are becoming "screen-agers," receiving most of their information from TV and computer screens.

Most children spend more time with media than in school and much more time with media than in meaningful conversation with their parents. Recent research demonstrates how the media form powerful influences on our children's development—on their behaviors, attitudes, language, and values, from their earliest ages. Consider the amount of time our children spend with television:

■ American children watch an average of 3 and 1/2 hours of TV each day, or 24 hours per week. Toddlers start watching TV at the age of two and, in some cases, as young as 18 months. By the time children graduate from high school, they have spent 18,000 hours in front of a TV set, and only 13,000 hours in a classroom.

There is a lot that is positive about TV, but heavy viewing of television places our children at risk of exposure to graphic violence, sexual portrayals, commercialism, racial and gender stereotyping, and vulgar language. An American child watching the average amount of TV will also see:

- 100,000 acts of TV violence, including 8,000 murders, by the time she reaches the 6th grade; and
- 20,000 TV commercials each year.

To many parents, these figures seem impossible. But they add up quickly: two TV murders and 60 commercials a day are easily seen in just a few hours of viewing.

Busy parents are looking for ways to deal with this media onslaught and with their children's TV viewing habits. Armed with an awareness of TV's influence and a commitment to take TV seriously, many families are finding ways to use TV to promote family interaction and communicate important lessons.

How to Talk with Your Kids About TV

1. Start early in talking with your kids about the TV, movies, and other media they use.

For parents of preschoolers, get in the habit of talking about TV—about how much to watch and what to watch. Just as with other topics of sexuality, drugs, or violence, it's never too early to start talking with your children about TV, movies, and other media.

Don't ignore what your children are watching, believing that "it's just TV," "it goes over their heads," or that TV can't possibly influence their knowledge, behaviors and attitudes. When you see something on TV that you consider inappropriate, let your children know why. It's important that you discuss programs that glorify violence or send irresponsible messages about sexual behavior or reinforce gender and racial stereotypes.

Many parents have walked into the TV room just in time to see their children watching sitcom characters joking about a "one night stand," or a drama about teenage pregnancy. Children are often exposed to these storylines before parents are ready to raise these subjects with them. Parents, feeling awkward, often switch the channel or cover their children's eyes.

Consider how the sexual stories on TV may compete with your efforts to guide your child's sex education by showing confusing, mistaken, or damaging information. Think also about how storylines or situations on television can be used to enrich your conversations with your child. Parents may want to use references to pregnancy or AIDS to deliver accurate information. Also take advantage of "socially responsible" storylines found in many TV programs to stimulate a discussion with your child.

Parents should strive to open the door for their children to ask questions about what they've seen on TV. And as adults, don't be afraid to initiate the conversation by asking questions like — "What did you think about what you saw in that show?" It could lead to an important conversation about sex, love, and relationships.

2. Put your family on a Family TV Diet.

Think about TV consumption much in the same way as you approach making healthy meals for your children. The first step is to bring total TV consumption under control. Many American families—parents and children alike—are "overeating TV" for five, eight, and even 10 hours a day. The National PTA, the American Medical Association, and many other organizations advocate that a child's TV viewing be limited to two hours a day or less.

Some diet plans start by keeping a food journal, listing everything consumed in a day and a week. Similarly, start by keeping a TV Diary for all family members. List all TV shows watched by each family member for a week, add up the number of hours spent and programs seen. Have a family conversation about which programs were worthwhile and which could be dropped and how some TV time could be redirected towards other activities.

3. Talk with your children about setting TV rules for the family.

In bringing TV consumption under control, involve your children in setting the rules for doing so. Just as you are guiding your children to assume more responsibility for decisions and behaviors in other areas of their lives, do the same with TV. Have them come up with some rules about TV viewing that they can agree to. There are many different types of rules: no TV until after homework or the dishes are done. Only programs agreed-upon in advance can be watched. Two hours of TV a day. One hour of TV a night during

school nights and two hours on weekends. Establish rules that work for your family's schedule and values and the ages and stages of your children.

4. In the Family TV Diet, create balanced TV meals with your children.

Look for "main TV dishes" with nutritious content, positive messages and role models, and educational programs. It may be all right to have a TV snack or dessert—a program watched for entertainment or relaxation alone, but such shows should come after the main course and not dominate the diet. Talk with your child and compare the messages and characters of a variety of different programs. Ask them, "What do you learn from that program?" "Why do you like to watch that character?" If a program is "just fun," that's a tip-off that it should be in the dessert category and not the main course! Select shows that communicate values worth watching. Look for programs that support school assignments, in language arts, science, or history.

5. Find "family exercises" to accompany your Family TV Diet.

Exercise is the key to a successful diet. Your Family TV Diet will be most successful when it is accompanied by family activities. Use TV programs as springboards for further activities and discussions. Follow viewing with conversations with your child about a programs content, whether the topic is TV violence or sexual activity.

Consult the booklet, "Talking with Kids About Tough Issues," for tips on how to talk with your children about these sensitive topics, using what you

watched together as the starting point. Make a trip to the public library to find books to continue the conversation. Help your child weave "a web of learning" between positive TV programs, related books, conversations, and activities. Many quality shows have their own Internet web sites, which can be accessed from schools and libraries. As Fred Rogers from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* has said, "TV may be the only electrical appliance that's more useful after it's turned off."

6. Help your child "see through TV."

The goal of media literacy curricula in schools is to foster critical viewing skills in young viewers. TV programs, from dramas to comedies to news programs, are highly manufactured products, with points of view, biases and innumerable decisions made by producers and writers on what to portray and what to leave out. Tell your child that, "TV violence is very different from violence in real life. We rarely see the pain of a real gunshot. TV violence often goes unpunished." Show them how TV ads rely on celebrities to sell products and special effects to make food look more appetizing.

7. Make it a point to watch programs with your children whenever possible.

Whether your children are in the preschool years or teenagers, find programs you can watch together. The Family TV Hour, like the family meal, should not become a casualty of life in the 90s. By taking the time to watch programs together, you are sending the message to your children that you care about the TV shows they watch. You are modeling "conscious viewing" for your children.

8. Look for special programs that help young people deal with "hot button" topics such as drugs, alcohol, sex, and peer pressure.

Check TV highlights in newspapers and magazines. For instance, *Nick News* on Nickelodeon broadcasts specials on AIDS and smoking. A new magazine, *Better Viewing*, is specifically devoted to helping parents find programming of value for their children. If they are ready, watch these programs with them. Or, make it a point to watch them yourself and record them for later use with your child. Check your public library branch and video store for educational videos for parents and children on these topics.

9. Be aware of fast-breaking news stories with violent or sexual content.

In recent years, American children have been exposed to the crash of TWA flight 800, the Oklahoma City bombing, and the Polly Klaas murder through repeated coverage on TV and in other media. It is likely that your child will be exposed to these stories via media outside of the home, through radios in school or in a friend's car, in newspaper headlines or from casual conversations. Rather than ignoring these news stories, parents should use them as an opportunity to comfort their children and discuss fears and anxieties. Reassure your children that, "bad things do happen, but we're safe and I'll always protect you." And as Fred Rogers also recommends to parents, when a disaster occurs, "Show them all the people who are helping."

Organizations for Information and Referral

American Medical Association
Information for the public available
at web site:
http://www.ama-assn.org

American Academy of Pediatrics
Department C-PRG (for a free
parent brochure)
P. O. Box 927
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927
http://www.aap.org

Center for Media Literacy
4727 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 403
Los Angeles, CA 90010
1-800-226-9494
http://websites.earthlink.net~cml

National Association for Family and
Community Education (NAFCE)
P. O. Box 835
Burlington, KY 41005

National PTA
330 N. Wabash Ave., Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60611
(312) 670-6782
http://www.pta.org
http://www.widmeyer.com/tv/
viewing/tips.htm

National Telemedia Council
120 E. Wilson St.
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 257-7712

Readings for Parents

Better Viewing Magazine

P. O. Box 538, Peterborough, NH 03458. (6 issues a year, $9.97)

Chen, M.

The Smart Parent's Guide to Kids' TV

San Francisco: KQED Books, 1994. (Copies available for $8.95 by calling Public TV Books, (800) 358-3000)

Children's Partnership

The Parents' Guide to the Information Superhighway

(Copies available for $8 by writing Parents' Guide, 1460 4th Street, Suite 306, Santa Monica, CA 90401)

Media Studies Center, Freedom Forum, Children and The Media Issue

Media Studies Journal, Fall 1994. (Copies available for $8 by writing the Media Studies Center, Freedom Forum, 580 Madison Avenue, 42nd Floor, New York, NY 10022)

Taking Charge of Your TV

The Family and Community Critical Viewing Project, A Partnership of The National PTA, Cable in the Classroom, and The National Cable TV Association, 1995. (Free copies available by calling 1-800-743-5355)

Readings for Children

Berenstain, Stan and Jan
The Berenstain Bears and Too Much TV
New York: Random House, 1984

Dobson, Clive
Fred's TV
Willowdale, Ontario: Firefly Books, 1989

Dr. Milton Chen is the author of "The Smart Parent's Guide to Kids' TV" and cohost of the PBS special, "The Smart Parent's Guide to TV Violence"

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